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# STATE FESTIVALS IN EGYPT AND MESOPOTAMIA<sup>1</sup>

By H. Frankfort

If we seek to understand the significance of the great festivals celebrated in Egypt and Mesopotamia we can draw on two groups of sources: Greek and native. I shall here only use the native records, for all our Greek authorities require corroboration. It would, of course, be absurd to deny that Herodotus and Plutarch knew a great deal about their Near Eastern contemporaries which escapes us. But the Greeks dealt rather high-handedly with barbarian matters; and I fear that their accounts resemble a certain collection of Greek terra-cottas of which the curator assured me that not more than ten per cent were fakes—only he was not quite sure which they were.

The native sources, whether written or pictorial, are records of official festivities, and that means, in the Ancient Near East, of religious observances. Only the purely trivial could count as secular; but whatever concerned the commonwealth was intimately linked with the superhuman. The state festivals always had a bearing on the people's relationship with the gods. They marked, in fact, a critical phase in that relationship and aimed at a reintegration, a readjustment or a renewal. The crisis which was the occasion of the festival could originate either in the human sphere or in the sphere of the superhuman; it might be a historical event, or an event in nature, such as a drought or a flood. Even historical events were not dissociated from divine ordinance, of course. It was for this very reason that a victory or a defeat affected the people's relations with its gods, and that religious celebrations marked the eve of those great building enterprises of which we see mostly the economic implications but which for the Ancients had above all a religious significance.

In either of the two cases which I have mentioned—whether a historical or a natural event brought on a crisis—the situation was exceptional and had to be met by special measures organized for the occasion. But there were other festivals which recurred periodically, on all the crucial dates of the farmers' calendar, at new moon and full moon, and above all, at the changes of the seasons. These too were, for the Ancients, critical events. One might think that in such cases the regular recurrence would blunt the sense of urgency and crisis, but the texts prove that this was not so. For we meet here what has been called a "dramatic conception of nature."<sup>2</sup> There was no recognition of impersonal and unchanging natural laws. Death was seen as a temporary victory of a hostile power, and, conversely, the arrival of spring after winter, and of the autumn rains after summer, was seen as the favourable outcome of conflicts, changes of fortune of certain gods. Now the manner of the change—whether the rains came early or late, whether the Nile brought a poor, an abundant, or a dangerous and excessive flood—made the difference between famine and prosperity, and society could not watch the course of nature dispassionately, or remain passive. It must

<sup>1</sup> Delivered at the Warburg Institute in October 1949 in a series of lectures on "Rites and Festivals."

<sup>2</sup> A. J. L. Wensinck, "The Semitic New Year and the Origin of Eschatology," in *Acta Orientalia*, I, Leiden, 1923.

participate on the side of those powers on whom it depended for its very existence. And in any case, it must align itself anew with the constellation of powers emerging when the change was completed.

The Near Eastern festivals, then, had always a core of high seriousness whatever festivities might be part of them. It was believed that something of supreme importance happened during the proceedings. Yet the festival was not merely a ritual on a rather grand scale; and the characteristic festive mood, with its excitement, its anticipation, its solemnity, its exuberance, was not merely the accessory of the performance of rites which happened to have a wide appeal. The festival brought ritual to a non-ritualistic setting; or, more precisely, the professional guardians and celebrants of ritual on the one hand, and the populace on the other, entered into a new reciprocal relationship. The priests brought sacred objects out into the open, or performed sacred acts in the presence of the people. And the people were prepared to see and to participate; they gathered in numbers, abandoning the fields and workshops, leaving all business at a standstill; and, for a brief space, they shared in mysteries in which they had usually no part. But at the festival their part was an essential one: they helped to create it. For the official display was correlated with the popular expectation of it. Hence a characteristic tension which, in the act of participation, was resolved in a sense of fulfilment. Display and approach, tension and fulfilment, are of the essence of a truly festive mood.

This mood was slowly built up. None of the great Near Eastern festivals lasted less than a couple of days, several lasted as many as twelve days or more. During this period the actors and the audience, the priests performing their ritual and the motley crowd that assisted, created together a separate if transient existence, a reality set apart from that of every day. They created a world in which, for a passing moment, the human and the divine met. When we follow in detail the course of these festivals, we seem to watch how the superhuman powers are conjured; how they are hedged round, as it were, by the intricacies of the ceremonial; and how they are finally approached. And it was believed that the nation derived its strength from this contact.

The occasions on which such contact was sought were so varied that I do not think much would be gained by an attempt to order them systematically. I shall rather describe some festivals in detail to show how strikingly they reveal the religious outlook and basic attitude of the people. I have already made the rough-and-ready distinction between festivals recurring at regular intervals, and others which were called for by an exceptional event or enterprise. It is significant that there is no record of this latter type from Egypt. There the belief in a fundamental cosmic equilibrium, a predestined harmony, made all historical events appear as a mere reaffirmation of the established order, and upheavals as necessarily superficial disturbances, which had to be ignored rather than emphasized by ritual celebration. In Mesopotamia a precisely opposite point of view prevailed, and I shall begin by describing a ceremony known as "The lamentation over the destruction of Ur."<sup>1</sup> That

<sup>1</sup> Samuel N. Kramer, *Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur* (Assyriological Studies No. 12, Chicago, 1940).

great Sumerian city, the seat of kingship for the whole country, had been overrun by a confederacy of mountaineers and desert people in about 2000 B.C., and had been utterly destroyed. The remnant of the population gathered on the ruins for a characteristic performance. The leading part was played by a special class of priests, the *kalu*, whose very existence is revealing for the view the Mesopotamians took of their relations with the gods. For it was the specific task of the *kalu* "to soothe the hearts of the gods," and he was called upon to do so at almost every occasion when the gods had to be approached. He sang litanies, accompanied by flute and drums, and the recurring refrains, the curious incantatory character of his hymns, were no doubt credited with casting a spell of pacification. These hymns are sometimes called "penitential psalms" but that is a misnomer. There is no question of repentance, only of sorrow. In the case of Ur, too, there is no indication that the people regarded their catastrophe as a punishment sent by the gods. The gods acted quite arbitrarily; in the words of another text:

"Since olden days when the country was founded, have the terms of kingship been constantly changed.

As for Ur's kingship, its term has now been changed for a different term."<sup>1</sup>

Under these conditions an approach to the gods had to be made against the heavy odds of unexplained ill-will. It had to be attempted, however, since without the gods the shattered commonwealth could not be reconstructed. And so the people assisted while the *kalu* sang the hymns which even in translation are both impressive and moving. They describe the disaster as a storm brought on by Enlil and the despair of the city-god; the people chanted the refrains with the priests.

You may find it odd that I have mentioned this celebration in discussing festivals, but it agrees in every feature with the usual festive procedure in Mesopotamia. Its sombre mood is peculiar to the occasion, but even so, the ceremony achieved a new approach to the gods and thereby transformed the hopeless despair in which it started, to a mood in which a new beginning could be made. The concluding line is:

"O Nanna, thy city, which has been returned to its place, exalts thee."

I have mentioned it as an example of an exceptional observance, in contradistinction to those which were periodically repeated. The two types are not, of course, absolutely separate. A special occasion can give to a recurring festival a peculiar significance. This happened in Mesopotamia, for instance, and in a rather dramatic manner, in the Sumerian ritual of the divine marriage, when the king was commanded to embody the bridegroom. The marriage of the mother goddess was celebrated at each New Year, for it signified the renewal of nature's fruitfulness. But it was by no means the rule that the king should act as her groom. For in Mesopotamia the world of the gods and the world of men were believed to be incommensurate. Only during a relatively short period, in the second half of the third millennium B.C., and only in some cities in the south, in Sumer proper, did kings some-

<sup>1</sup> Thorkild Jacobsen, in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, II, Chicago, 1943, p. 171.

times play the part of Tammuz.<sup>1</sup> When they did, it was at the express command of the goddess. For instance, one of these kings—Ishme Dagan—starts an inscription as follows: “I am he whom Inanna (Ishtar), queen of heaven and earth, has chosen for her beloved husband.” We do not know how the goddess made her wishes known—the normal way was through dreams and omens—and we do not know how she was represented at the festival. We do know, however, that she was throughout the leading character. One of the texts preserves the various hymns which were sung at the mysterious scene just before the king entered the bedchamber when he was transformed into, or fused with, the god Tammuz. Another preserves other parts of the performances.<sup>2</sup> It starts with a series of hymns of praise of the goddess Ishtar as the evening star, namely as the planet Venus (which we call Venus because it was viewed as a manifestation of Ishtar in Mesopotamia). The hymns possess the character of incantations, aiming once more at “soothing the heart” of the deity in order to make approach possible. The final passage describes the coming of the goddess, one is tempted to say: on her way to the city where her wedding is to take place. But the text only describes her appearance in the evening sky, and the homage which the living creatures bring her; she is called “my lady.”

“The people look towards the mountains. . . .  
 The ox bellows in its yoke,  
 The sheep in their folds stir up the dust with their feet,  
 The roving wild goats and asses, the living creatures of the desert, . . .  
 The fishes of the deep, the birds of heaven,  
 Turn at my lady’s appearance to their nests and hiding-places.  
 The roving creatures of the country bend the knee before her.”

Then the divine marriage is described and two features should be noticed. Care is taken throughout to bring the people into the description; the text does not deal with a rite of kingship, but with a festival in which the community takes part. The oldest Mesopotamians had called themselves “the black-headed people” and the term remained in use and occurs in our quotation, below. In the second place it is clear that the king is entirely subservient to the goddess. She is, again, referred to as “my lady” or “the lady of the palace.”

“In the palace named ‘House of the instruction of the country,’  
 In the house of the king of the lands,  
 In the house of the Euphrates,  
 Have the black-headed people of the land, all together,  
 Placed a dais for the divine lady of the palace.  
 Thereon the king, who is a god, takes his seat.

To guard the life-breath of all lands. . . .  
 To perform the rites correctly on the day the moon is invisible,  
 Has, on New Year’s Day, the day of observance,  
 A couch been set up for my lady.”

<sup>1</sup> Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods*, Chicago, 1948, pp. 295 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Published by E. Chiera, *Sumerian Religious*

*Texts*, Upland, Pa., 1924, No. 1. The translations were made by Professor Thorkild Jacobsen.

The purpose of the celebration is here explicitly given. It serves "to guard the life-breath of all lands"—which means nature's fertility when it revives after winter or summer.

It is in keeping with the purpose of the festival that the union of the divine couple is followed by a feast, with the king and the goddess on the throne dais before the assembled people. The display of abundance cast a spell of prosperity over the year that had just begun. The text reads:

"Around the shoulders of his beloved bride he has laid his arm, . . .  
Like daylight she ascends the throne on the great dais;  
The king, like unto the sun, sits beside her.  
Abundance, pleasure, wealth are ranged before her,  
A sumptuous meal is placed before her.  
The black-headed people are ranged before her."

Then there is a damaged passage referring to music and singers, and finally, once more, the people are mentioned:

"The palace is in festive mood, the king rejoices,  
The people are passing the day in abundance."

If I have succeeded at all in conveying something of the mood of the occasion through these quotations, it will be clear that the festivities, far from being mere merrymaking, reached out, as it were, beyond the scope of human action. You may say that this really is the province of ritual—or even of magic—and I shall not attempt to make precise distinctions between notions which merge continually into one another. But I may once more emphasize the difference between festival and ritual by reading a letter which gives an account of a divine marriage. This letter, written some 1,500 years later than our text, was addressed to an Assyrian king. The kings of Assyria did not act in this ritual at all but, being responsible for the cult of the gods, they received daily reports. It is practically certain that the god Nabu and the goddess Tashmetum were represented by their statues.

"To the king, my lord, your servant Nergal-Sharrani: Greetings to the king my lord. May Nabu and Marduk bless the king my lord.

To-morrow, that is on the fourth of Iyyar, toward evening, Nabu and Tashmetum will enter the bedchamber. On the fifth, they shall be given of the king's food to eat, the temple overseer being present. A lion's head and a torch (?) shall be brought to the palace. From the fifth to the tenth both gods will stay in the bedchamber, the temple overseer staying with them. On the eleventh Nabu will go out, he will exercise his feet, he will go to the hunting park; he will kill wild oxen; then he will go up and dwell in his habitation.

. . . I have written to the king my lord in order that the king my lord may know."<sup>1</sup>

Whatever was done here—and this matter-of-fact account seems to me a less

<sup>1</sup> R. H. Pfeiffer, *State Letters of Assyria*, New Haven, Conn., 1935, p. 156, No. 215.

efficient guide to the imagination than the older poem—we are confronted with a ritual, not with a festival. The people are nowhere taken into account and all actions and manipulations remain the concern of professional ritualists.

I have called the earlier account of the divine marriage, in which a deified king acted the groom, an example of a periodic rite to which exceptional circumstances gave added significance. It also illustrates an occasion when the divine condescends to become manifest in a mortal of its choice. This, as I have said, was a rare event in Mesopotamia. But it was the rule in Egypt, for Pharaoh, like some African kings of our own time, transcended humanity. He disposed of powers which affected the very course of nature. He was never deified, for he was divine in essence. In fact he was begotten by a god, as certain reliefs show, and as the texts of all periods explicitly aver. It was, therefore, natural that Pharaoh should take exclusive charge of society's relations with the supernatural. Even in the daily ritual, in all the temples of the land, the officiating priest legitimized himself at the beginning of the service by saying:

"I am the priest. It is the king who has sent me to behold the god."<sup>1</sup>

At the great festivals the king was always present in person and was the main actor. But the people took part, not only through representative officials, but also in the mass. In certain reliefs figures drawn at the edge of the scenes are explicitly marked "subjects" or "people." Nor were they merely admiring the show. In a scene showing the king at the annual feast of "the Interment of Osiris," when the pillar, in which the god rises from death, is erected, the populace is well represented.<sup>2</sup> Some dance, but others are engaged in a mock battle with papyrus stalks. Herodotus saw such an engagement at Papremis in the Delta, when there was a feint of preventing the statue of the god Horus from entering the temple of Isis, his mother, in order (as we now know from Egyptian texts) to have intercourse with her—a mythological formula for immortality-through-rebirth, which occurs in various forms in Egypt. The ancient Egyptian mock fights find a parallel among the Shilluk of the Sudan, who use Dhurra stalks instead of papyrus in an engagement at the coronation of their king; this happens just before the ruler enters the temple where he will become the incarnation of the god Nyakang.<sup>3</sup> In all these instances the ritual pretends to achieve something which is felt to some extent to be presumption, and the mock battle externalizes the expected opposition to the achievement and at the same time overcomes that opposition. The mock fights underline the critical character of the festival of which they form part.

It is possible to get an impression of the popular festivities during a state festival from the reliefs of Tutankhamen in the temple of Luxor, although they are sadly damaged.<sup>4</sup> They depict the feast of Opet, which, like many

<sup>1</sup> A. Moret, *Le rituel du culte divin journalier en Egypte*, Paris, 1902, pp. 42 f.; 55.

<sup>2</sup> Ahmed Fakhry, "A note on the tomb of Kheruef at Thebes," in *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Egypte*, XLII, Cairo, 1943, Pl. XXXIX.

<sup>3</sup> P. P. Howell and W. P. G. Thomson, "The death of a Reth of the Shilluk and the installation of his successor," in *Sudan Notes and Records*, XXVII, 1946, pp. 59 ff.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Wolf, *Das schöne Fest von Opet*, Leipzig, 1931.

local festivals, consisted of a visit which the gods paid to a neighbouring temple. In this case Amon of Thebes, with the goddess Mut and their son Khonsu, went from the main shrine of Karnak to the temple at Luxor, two miles upstream. In saying that these gods went I speak the language of the texts because we do not know exactly what did go. No cult images have survived—the stone figures of gods in our museums stood in the courts and colonnades of the temples. The figure or object in which the god was thought to abide, stood in a small shrine in the Holy of Holies; the text of the daily temple ritual treats it as if it were anthropomorphic, and it is likely enough that it often consisted of a small statue of gold—which was called “the flesh of the gods.” Whatever the cult object, it was often kept in the cabin or deck-house of a model boat which was its portable shrine. On festive occasions this was carried on poles on the shoulders of priests and displayed to the people. Even then the doors or curtains of the cabin hid the object, but the boats themselves provided a magnificent sight. Stern and prow bore the emblem of the god—the ram of Amon, the falcon of Khonsu, decked with costly necklaces and crowns. Gold statuettes of the king in the act of “adoring his father” were placed beside the deckhouse; all kinds of gold vessels used in the cult, stands with offerings and sunshades of ostrich feathers were carried along in the procession from the temple to the landing-stage. There the model boats were placed on Nile-craft, the king and queen boarded the royal barge, and the whole flotilla was towed upstream by a detachment of soldiers. This was the show at which the people revelled. Along the bank of the Nile little booths were erected where food and drink were sold. Dancing girls gave exhibitions; Sudanese soldiers, excited by their drummers, broke into a sword-dance. From the fragments of relief which survive we can reconstruct a colourful day of rejoicing which explains why the annalist of one Pharaoh could end his notes on the booty taken in Palestine with the lyrical phrase: “Behold, the army of His Majesty was drunk and anointed with oil every day, as at a feast in Egypt.”<sup>1</sup>

We know next to nothing about the meaning of the feast, for the relevant part of the reliefs has been destroyed, and I have only discussed the surviving fragments here because they tell us more about the people's share in the festivities than the more usual hieratic renderings, which are almost exclusively concerned with the king's part in the celebrations.

In Egypt the king is not only the main celebrant; he is, at the same time, one of the beneficiaries of the festival. For in an Egyptian ceremony the divine is not only embodied in the statue of the god who is the object of the rites; it is likewise present in the king who celebrates on behalf of the community. The gulf between the human and the divine, which the Mesopotamian approached with infinite precautions, had been shifted in Egypt and thereby reduced. The gulf did not separate humanity from the gods; it separated commoners from the divine king. At the festivals a visible god communicated with the ineffable powers in nature, and this circumstance explains the lack of anxiety, the carefree joy, which seems to distinguish the Egyptian festivals from those of Mesopotamia.

<sup>1</sup> J. H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt*, II, Chicago, 1906, p. 197, § 462.



On one occasion, however, anxiety prevailed even in Egypt. This was the case when the king died, for then the established order would seem to collapse. I cannot discuss here the elaborate ceremonies which accompanied the new king's accession, the burial of his father, and finally, the coronation. They all aimed at restoring the torn fabric of the nation's bonds with the company of the gods. But I shall quote here one of the songs used at the final stages. For it expresses a sense of intense relief, and that not only because an unstable political interregnum had been consolidated, but because the very order of nature was reaffirmed. You will notice that in the second stanza of this song, even the regular sequence of hours and days and months, the rise of the Nile, and the succession of the seasons, are seen as a result of the ceremony in which kingship, as part of the established order of creation, is restored to the land:

"Rejoice, thou entire land, the goodly time has come.  
A lord is appointed to all countries. . . .  
O all ye righteous, come and behold!  
Truth has repressed falsehood.  
The sinners are fallen on their faces.  
All that are covetous are turned back.

The water stands (high) and does not fail,  
The Nile carries a big flood.  
The days are long, the nights have hours,  
The months come aright.  
The gods are content and happy of heart, and  
Life is spent in laughter and wonder.<sup>1</sup>

Laughter and wonder—that was the mood of a festival in Egypt.

In Mesopotamia that mood was rare, and it was never taken for granted. It was, at best, reached at the conclusion of a festival which was begun in fear. For the divine was, in the first place, the *mysterium tremendum*, and there was no mediator. Man faced, alone in all his inadequacy, a group of divine masters who had created him for the express purpose that he might be their servant. Therefore the rulers of Mesopotamia, from the third millennium down to the sixth century B.C. pride themselves, above all, on being "men of understanding," which means that they were able correctly to interpret the will of the gods. It is characteristic of Mesopotamian festivals that they are marked by extraordinary precautions, and the rôle of the Kalu priests was, as we have seen, the soothing of the hearts of the gods.

Some festivals seem entirely to consist of precautions; at least, if there is another meaning, it escapes us. At the city of Erech there was a feast following full moon. A text<sup>2</sup> prescribes that in the Anu temple the statues of gods and goddesses were to be taken from their shrines and placed in the court. Libations were to be made and hymns and prayers sung. A torchlight procession was held within the temple precincts and food offerings were to be made. These are ritual prescriptions; but the text continues:

<sup>1</sup> Erman-Blackman, *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians*, London, 1927, pp. 278 f.

<sup>2</sup> F. Thureau Dangin, *Rituel Akkadiens*, Paris, 1921, pp. 118-25.

"The people shall light fires in their houses; they shall offer food to Anu, Antu and all the gods . . . ; they shall say the same prayers as specified above. The guards of the city shall light fires in the street and at the crossroads. The gates of Erech shall not be closed (?) until dawn. The guards shall place posts on the right and the left of the gates, and they shall keep fires burning in the gates until dawn."

It is likely enough that the fires and open gates are meant to counteract darkness and constriction at the moment that the moon begins to wane. How much the people knew about the significance of such rites, I cannot guess. Our text, as we saw, did not explain the prescribed usages; but another text, which, as a great exception, gives the mythological significance of New Year customs, ends as follows:

"Whosoever erases this tablet or puts it in water; and whosoever reads it for whom it is not lawful to read it, . . . may Assur, Bel, Nabu, Ishtar of Nineveh, Ishtar of Arbela, all the gods of heaven and earth, . . . all of them, curse him with a curse without deliverance and with trouble; and as long as he lives may they have no mercy upon him. His name and his seed from the land may they cause to depart, and may they place his flesh in the mouths of dogs."<sup>1</sup>

We assume, then, that the people had only a limited understanding of the precise meaning of the customs. But they knew what was at stake, and at an important festival, like that of the New Year, they took an active part and the interplay between priests, king and people is fully developed. The festival started in utter gloom: Tammuz, or Marduk, or Assur—however the god might be named who personified the generative force of nature, was believed dead, or rather captive in the mountain of death. The community attuned itself to his desperate condition, there was purification and atonement and the king went to the temple, was deprived of his insignia and struck on the cheek by the High Priest. He then confessed his sins and obtained absolution. Meanwhile the populace became disturbed. The text to which I have referred, describes how "people hasten through the streets," seeking the god, saying "where is he held captive." His chariot is sent careering on a country road without its driver, a wailing-woman impersonates the goddess seeking her lover. Finally there was a mock fight: the esoteric text says: "After Marduk went into the mountain the city fell into a tumult because of him, and fighting within it they made." But then occurred a sudden reversal of mood, the god was liberated, defeated the powers of chaos and death and consummated the sacred marriage.

The New Year's festival was much more complex than this summary would suggest; but it has, I hope, become clear that the whole population was involved in its celebration. To appreciate the mood of a Mesopotamian festival, one must consider it in detail; and we shall do this, in conclusion, with the somewhat simpler ceremonies which accompany the restoration or building of a temple.

<sup>1</sup> S. Langdon, *The Babylonian Epic of Creation*, Oxford, 1923, p. 49.

In both Egypt and Mesopotamia the building or renewal of a god's temple was recognized as the greatest service which could be rendered to him. But the Mesopotamians realized the enormity of the undertaking when man presumed to offer residence to a deity. In Egypt, when Senusert I wanted to rebuild the temple of Heliopolis, he addressed a crown council as follows:

"Behold, my majesty decrees a work and is thinking of a deed. I will establish offerings of the gods and I will make a work, namely a great house for my father Atum. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

And Queen Hatshepsut writes in a building inscription:

"I have done this according to the design of my heart."<sup>2</sup>

But when Esarhaddon of Assyria succeeded his father who had destroyed Babylon, and he wanted to make good this vandalism, he wrote:

"At that time I, Esarhaddon, king of the universe, king of Assyria, who waits for Assur's command, etc. . . . through the insight which Assur and Marduk opened up in my understanding, for the restoration of the images of the great gods, with uplifted hand, with supplication and prostration before Assur, king of the gods, and the great lord Marduk, I implored their divinity: 'With whom, O ye great gods, creators of gods and goddesses, do you send me on this difficult mission to an unknown place—a mission of restoration, with people who are not loyal, who do not know their own minds, who have been foolish since days of old. O ye creators of gods and goddesses, build the structure with your own hands, the abode of your exalted divinity. Whatever is in your hearts, so let it be done.'"<sup>3</sup>

A text of Gudea, a king who lived 1,500 years earlier, agrees in all respects with the later building inscriptions, but it is more detailed.<sup>4</sup> The first sign that the gods desired the people of his city to rebuild the temple of Ningirsu was given when the gods withheld the water of the Tigris at the time when the inundation was due. There, then, was a crisis indeed. "Gudea took notice," as the text says, and "paid his respect with great things," that is: he made valuable sacrifices, whereupon the god Ningirsu appeared to him in his dream and "spoke to him concerning the building of his house." However "Gudea, his heart overclouded, was pondering the command," and decided to go on pilgrimage to a temple of the mother-goddess Nanshe, making sacrifices on the way at the temples which his barge passed. In the temple of Nanshe he describes his dream, which is full of curious imagery—Gudea himself appears as a donkey pawing the ground, impatient to start the

<sup>1</sup> A. De Buck, in *Analecta Orientalia*, XVII, *Assyria*, II, Chicago, 1927, p. 259, § 670. Rome, 1938, pp. 48-57.

<sup>2</sup> J. H. Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt*, II, Chicago, 1906, p. 125, § 303.

<sup>3</sup> D. D. Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria*, II, Chicago, 1927, p. 259, § 670.

<sup>4</sup> F. Thureau Dangin, *Die Sumerisch-Akkadischen Königinschriften*, Leipzig, 1907, pp. 89-141. Translated by Professor Thorkild Jacobsen.

work on the temple. Nevertheless, he attempts to obtain still greater certainty as to what he is expected to do. "Lying down upon the skin of a virgin goat kid" in the temple, with fires of juniper and "herbs of the mountain" burning, he asked for another dream: "Ningirsu, thy house I shall build for thee, but I have not my specifications." He dreamt then that the god "stood at his head, prodding him with a sword" but also giving him further details. Materials were consequently ordered, the god's statue was, apparently, lodged for the time in the city of Eridu and the site of the temple was cleared. This was the first occasion on which the population was required to share in the undertaking. One might call it a festival of the dedication of the site. A kind of civic peace was proclaimed; all demonstrations of anger, everything that might be unpropitious, was to be avoided. The text says literally:

"The mother did not say angry words to a child running away from her;  
When a servant had erred, the master did not beat him over the head,  
When a maid had misbehaved, the mistress did not slap her face.  
Nobody brought a lawsuit before Gudea, the builder of the temple."

The city was, moreover, purified; great fires of aromatic woods were lighted and sorcerers and other unsavoury persons were temporarily removed from the locality.

A little later came the final ordeal: the first brick for the new temple was moulded by the ruler. One of the earliest princes of which we know is shown carrying the basket with mud on his head on his way to mould the brick. And two thousand years later Nabopolassar of Babylon wrote: "I bent my neck for Marduk, my lord, and girding up the robes of my royalty, I carried bricks and clay upon my head."<sup>1</sup> The night before the moulding, Gudea slept in the temple, perhaps to safeguard himself against evil influences. In the morning, carrying the clay, he went, surrounded by protecting deities, to the temple site, where again, great piles of aromatic wood were burning. The clay seems to have been mixed with butter, honey and aromatic herbs. It was allowed to dry during the rest of the day and the night, and was lifted out of the mould at sunrise before the assembled people. If it came out whole—not a matter of course with mudbricks—all fear was gone and, in fact, it was believed that this meant that the gods themselves now carried out the building operations. However Gudea did not relax:

"Like a young man, who is founding a house, he let no pleasure come before him.  
Like a cow who turns its eyes to its calf, he brought all his love to bear on the temple."

The inauguration of the temple took place on New Year's Day, so that the new beginning, which had been brought about by so great an effort of all, would be carried forward on the current of the new life which now set in. On New Year's Eve the god was brought back from Eridu, and this part of the festival is described in a manner which still throbs with expectation and tension:

<sup>1</sup> S. Langdon, *Die neubabylonischen Königsinschriften*, 63, lines 61-67.

“The prince made the city kneel and the country bow down;  
He had filled cracks [in the road] and removed obstacles,  
He had obliterated tracks of mud.  
The city was like the mother of a sick man preparing a physic;  
Like animals, beasts of the plain, who huddle together;  
Like the wild lion, master of the plain, who crouches.  
During the day there were prayers, during the night orisons.  
At the crack of dawn the god arrived.”

Something great had been achieved. The work, completed, demonstrated that harmony between the city and the unaccountable divine powers had effectively been established; and man could make a fresh attempt to live, as one knew one should live:

“Gudea paid heed to the laws of Nanshe and Ningirsu,  
Left not the orphan at the rich man’s mercy,  
Left not the widow at the mercy of the strong. . . .  
Days of righteousness dawned for him  
And on the neck of lawlessness and of rebels he set his foot.”

In a rather moving way the festive mood seems to light up the future and to hold out the promise of a better world. We have observed the same in Egypt, and do we not ourselves remember celebrations—in our childhood, or even later—which filled one with high expectancy; with awe as well as with joy; with the feeling that ordinary life could not simply continue as if nothing had happened, after such an experience? It is true that, outside the magic circle of festivity, the better world might never dawn. Yet life would not be the same without the promise.